

USS Pueblo:

The Ship That Went Out in the Cold

INSTALLMENT 10

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More Beatings

The guards continued to manhandle the men. One hit seaman Richard Rogala in the back of the head with a rifle butt and kicked him in the groin when he fell to the ground. His shipmates lifted Rogala aboard the train. Another guard clouted Bucher from time to time in the back and soon the captain felt a steady pain. One who spoke English hit the big, muscular quartermaster in the head several times and questioned him about spying. The quartermaster gave the answer all the men were giving:

"I am Charles Law, petty officer first class, serial number 3899-110."

At times the captors showed unexpected compassion. One asked Rosales if his blindfold was too tight. Scarcely able to breathe, for the cloth covered his swollen mouth as well, Rosales nodded. The man loosened the blindfold, loosened the wrist bonds. Someone noticed Bucher's hands turning black and loosened his bonds. Another pressed a cup of water to Bucher's lips and shoved a large ball of butter covered with sugar in his mouth. He swallowed it.

During the trip, selected crewmen were taken forward to a separate car and interrogated. And beaten. They pounded the back of Lt. Murphy's neck until his head was so low he could scarcely talk. He told them nothing. Bucher was led forward half a dozen times, shoved into a seat and questioned 20 minutes at a stretch. The interpreter was Max. Bucher denied again and again that he was a

CIA agent, denied he had intruded into Korean waters, repeated his cover story. And that was all Max got out of him when the train pulled into Pyongyang just before dawn and the North Koreans yanked off the blindfolds and untied the crewmen's hands.

HUMILIATED PRISONERS

The men stepped off the train into the white glare of floodlights. They stood with their hands above their heads, the classic pose of prisoners, while cameras clicked and whirled. These photographs the North Koreans would boldly show the world. Then they herded the men onto more busses, with windows similarly shrouded, and made them sit with their hands in their pockets and their heads bowed.

At dawn the busses stopped. It is doubtful any of the crew slept all that night; the captain did not.

As Bucher left the bus a guard kicked him in the small of his back, kicked him again in his wounded leg. That hurt. His hands free, Bucher cocked his fist and lunged toward the guard, but before he could reach him, three other guards grabbed him.

In the cold morning light, before the men were once again blindfolded, they could see that the building where they were taken was four stories tall, about 130 feet long and 60 feet wide. All its windows were covered. It was built solidly of brick and stone and its walls were six or eight inches thick. It would come to be known among the men of the Pueblo, and etched in horror on their memories, as "The Barn."

Rosales and Murphy lifted

Woelk's stretcher as gently as they could and trudged blindly up three flights along with the rest of the crew, prodded along with rifle barrels.

The guards assigned the men four to a room, except for two large rooms where they put as many as 12 men. After each room was filled the guards removed the blindfolds and shut the door; no one knew who was in the room next door. Each room thus became its own isolated cell of anxiety.

Murphy and Rosales, as directed, placed Woelk in a room with the other seriously wounded men, Chicca and Crandell, then were sent to another room across the hall. Dale Rigby, the ship's baker, was put in the room with the wounded. Murphy and Tim Harris were nothing to identify them as officers and shared rooms with enlisted

men. Steve Harris, Gene Lacy and Skip Schumacher, who like Bucher were wearing their officers' hats, were assigned separate rooms.

THE CAPTAIN ISOLATED

Bucher was put in a room containing a small table, a chair, a cot with one blanket, a pillow stuffed with straw. The captain knew by the shuffle of feet, and by an occasional outcry, that many of his men were in the same building, on the same floor. All of them? Where were the wounded? Were they being treated? What was in those canvas bags he knew were now in the hands of his captors? His brain pounded with a torrent of questions and his body ached. He did not attempt to sleep.

When at last all was quiet in The Barn, a guard opened Bucher's door and led him down the hall to an interrogation room where an interpreter waited with several North Korean officers. The interpreter would earn the nickname Wheezy; he continually tried to cover up his inability to translate rapidly by coughing.

Again Bucher demanded care for his wounded, demanded to see them, demanded that the crew be kept together. Again they acted as though they did not hear. For 45 minutes, between coughing fits, Wheezy shouted the familiar accusations: the Pueblo had intruded, it was a spy ship, Bucher a CIA agent. Bucher repeated his de-

nials.

By the frantic tone of their questioning Bucher detected that they were genuinely concerned about the possibility of sudden U.S. retaliation—a possibility he himself felt was not unlikely. He decided to play on their concern. He told them he had radioed his position when he was captured and the United States surely would soon be demanding quick return of the ship and its crew.

They sent him back to his room and gave him a plate of boiled turnips and some bread and butter. He did not touch the food. A short while later they brought him back to the interrogation room and Lloyd Bucher received the first shock of his captivity. There on the table lay the cardboard jacket containing his service record.

Was he married? What were his children's names? What were his former duty stations and assignments? They had the information in front of them. Bucher gave the answers.

SPYING FOR CIA

One entry said Bucher had attended CIC school. True. He had attended the Navy's Combat Information School at Glenview, Ill., in 1954. Wasn't CIC the same as CIA? They kicked him in the back, struck him, insisted he now confess he was a CIA agent as they suspected all along. He refused. They kicked him some more and sent him in pain to his room.

At midmorning a guard once again thrust open Bucher's door. In the hallway stood the other five Pueblo officers and the guard marched them, with the captain in the lead, to the end of the hall where a long, narrow room ran the width of the building. At one end tables were arranged in a horseshoe and at the center sat a North Korean general. About 40 other officers stood around, behind the tables. The captives took seats, according to rank, in six chairs placed within the horseshoe facing the general. The room was unlit except for a single bulb directly above their heads.

The general asked each man his name and his job aboard the Pueblo. They responded with names, ranks, serial numbers. They also gave their jobs, to protect their cover story of being an oceanographic ship.

The general, with Max inter-

preting, launched into a 20-minute harangue against the United States. Why did America want to provoke a new war with North Korea? Did Bucher realize there were 500,000 American troops poised in South Korea?

Bucher argued there weren't that many. The general scaled down the claim to 50,000 and asked why they were there.

"Because the South Korean government requested them,"

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pionage agents caught redhanded. You will be shot. How do you want it, one at a time or all together?"

Bucher leaped to his feet. "Just shoot me," he said, "and release the crew and the ship."

"The ship now belongs to us!"

"You captured my ship in international waters where we had every right to be. Your act was an act of war against the United States."

Bucher replied, "in order to provide assistance in defense of their country."

SHOT AT SUNDOWN

An officer drew back his hand to strike Bucher but the general stayed him.

"You are not prisoners of war," the general shouted. "You have no rights under the Geneva Convention. You are es-

A guard shoved Bucher back into his chair. The general demanded that each officer admit to espionage. Each, in turn, repeated the research cover story.

"You will be shot at sundown," the general said, and dismissed them.

(Continued Wednesday)